

## Many Ways I've Tried by honeybyler

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Homophobia, M/M, both on troy & james parts and mikes part, bullying i guess, but mike isnt REALLY a homophobe, he just uses questionable language towards will, mikes an asshole but he gets better, will is too forgiving but mike is grateful

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, James (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Troy (Stranger Things), Will Byers

**Relationships:** Byeler, Mike Wheeler/Will Byers, byler - Relationship

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**Summary:**

if mike became friends with troy and james and was an asshole but then realized he had feelings for will

or how i see it

## 1. goons

Every morning in Hawkins, Indiana a young Will Byers could be seen riding his bike. Never sleeping in later than 8, he was out the door by 8:15 on the weekends and every day during the Summer. School was a different story, though. Joyce was lucky if she could pull him out of bed on time for him to get to school without missing some of his first period, often resulting in him skipping breakfast, but Will didn't mind this. On the lawn, with a thin layer of morning dew coating it, his bike laid in wait to be picked up and hauled to school. Heavy feet stomped down their wooden stairs as Will dragged himself to grab his bike, picking it up and trying to wipe off any condensation that may be left on the seat- he got enough shit for his physical appearance, he didn't need to deal with Troy and his goons patronizing him cause it looked like he wet himself. An amusing thought, maybe, but not when he was aware he would be the butt of everyone's jokes as he always is.

Will let himself close his eyes as the wind lapped around his head, a faint mist forming water droplets on his cheeks and hair as his rubber tires traveled down Mirkwood on his way to Hawkins Middle School. Though, he loved riding his bike and the excuse to see his best friends, there was a reason that Will Byers dreaded going to school every morning. No, it wasn't the kid who made anyone else at that school tremble in their boots. While he wasn't fond of Troy, he wasn't nearly as afraid of him as he was of Michael Wheeler.

Day after day, he was tormented by the same kid who sat next to him in kindergarten and shared his crayons and even gave him markers when he saw that Will didn't have many school supplies. Somehow, little Mikey grew up to be one of the biggest assholes that Will had ever encountered, after Lonnie of course. While Michael wasn't nearly as bad, he still got that same heavy feeling that resonated in the pit of his stomach when he knew that he would have to see him. It made school hell on Earth for him, he already dealt with his own issues at home, the added stress of watching out for the Wheeler kid was enough to drive him crazy.

Much to his dismay, Will arrived at the front of the school in what

seemed like record time, lost in his own thought with dew resting on his eyelashes. He reluctantly put his bike in the rack not far from the main entrance, pulling a small lock out of his jacket pocket to make sure he didn't have a repeat of the Michael incident that occurred at the beginning of the year. Walking outside after school and finding his bike in a tree, stuck trying to get it for hours as Michael stood there and watched him while laughing didn't seem ideal for Will and there was no way in hell he would repeat that incident. As he was knelt on the ground, locking up his bike, his two best friends walked up to him.

"Hey, Byers!" Dustin smiled his big goofy grin down at him as he lisped the last bit through his missing teeth.

"We didn't hear from you all weekend, man!" the other groaned at his friend, helping him up when he finished getting the, proving to be difficult, padlock on. Will looked at the two of them and shrugged his shoulders awkwardly, picking his backpack off the ground and putting his arms through the straps.

"I guess I got carried away. Still kinda upset about the Wheeler th—" Lucas was quick to cut him off, he almost never let Will finish thoughts about Michael unless they absolutely need to be finished.

"We didn't wait to see you all weekend just to come back and hear more Wheeler griping! You and I both know Michael is unreasonable and a big idiot who finds it funny to pick on people who shouldn't be picked on! I promise you, if we all stop reacting whenever he tries to pull some shit on you like he did last month he'll get bored and leave! Ignore the enemy, Byers! You dig?" Lucas, if not straight forward, was always a very motivational guy. He frequently had big speeches prepared for any situation in which his friends needed help, taking it upon himself to be the 'leader' of their friend group, Dustin and Will often asked for advice.

Will thought to himself for a second, knowing that Lucas would inevitably end up being proven right. If Michael really did just pick on Will because he enjoyed the upset reaction it was usually met with, that meant one of either two things. Either Will would have to stand up for himself and tell Michael to back off, or if Will just ignored him long enough, Michael would get bored and leave him

alone. Neither of which were bad choices, but all three of those kids knew there was no way in hell that Will could stand up for himself in any circumstances. Sad, but understandable considering the giant heaping pile of shit that Will had already been through, only at the age of 13.

“Well what do we have here? Freakshows back in town!” Troy snickered as his goons, Michael and James, followed suit nearly latching off of him. They always stood in a way that never made sense to Will, but he never had too much time to analyze their positioning, especially when he knew that the one thing going through all of their heads collectively was “We need to make these three miserable!”.

All any of them could think to do was scoff and roll their eyes, unimpressed by recycled insults and tired from the weekend prior. Lucas moved to push Will and Dustin more towards the school when Troy stepped on his untied shoelace, causing Lucas to fall flat on the concrete but not after a nasty collision with another student’s bike. Quickly turning around to see what happened, the other two were shocked to see blood on the pavement. Both confused and disgusted, Will looked between Lucas’ blood and Michael, who, for no reason other than the obvious, looked guilty. He hadn’t even been the one to trip him, and yet he still felt bad. At least he showed some signs of not being a heartless douchebag.

Dustin was already on the ground, helping Lucas stand as he offered some napkins from his lunchbox in order to clean him up. Politely accepting, he stood there with a bunch of napkins pressed to his nose, red slowly seeping into white towel as his nose kept bleeding, dirty looks being thrown from both sides.

“I’d expect you guys to have different insults by now, but I forget you’re neanderthals sometimes.” Dustin spat at Troy, placing a hand on Lucas’ shoulder and pointing accusatively at the group of bullies in front of them.

“I forget you’re neanderthalth thometimeth!”” James shot back from behind Troy, stepping closer to the action after pulling the weakest excuse for an insult out of his ass in order to fight back.

“That’s an insult to neanderthals, even they had some kind of intelligence.” Will muttered under his breath, meaning to keep the comment to himself. Unfortunately, Michael frickin’ Wheeler had to hear him.

As nonchalantly as one could, Michael pushed in front of Troy and James, standing face to face with Will as he crossed his arms across his chest. His heart froze, and he couldn’t explain why. At first he brushed the feeling off, saying it was just him being terrified, but this was different. Seeing Michael up close made him second guess every insult they had ever thrown at him, reconsidering if they really were wrong when they called him a queer as he tried to count every one of Michael freckles as the latter breathed down his neck. Will was too afraid to look at him in the eye because he knew that he would have it out for him, already crossing the boundary at looking near him in the first place.

Michael continued to examine Will, just now noticing how small and fragile this kid really was as he quivered in fear beneath his shadow, wide puppy-dog eyes staring at him. Things like this always made him rethink the friends he had chosen, feeling sick to his stomach when anyone seemed even remotely afraid of him was not the feeling of superiority and satisfaction that supposedly washed over his other friends as they made smaller kids cower away after ranking them pretty bad. Every time Michael opened his mouth to insult Will, he regretted it when he saw fear and acceptance both in his eyes. He hadn’t examined him this closely before, but he saw how Will looked at him, he was used to this kind of treatment and not just from him, not just a bully spewing playground insults. Oddly enough, the thought of anyone else treating Will as awful as he did made him feel even sicker, because he knew he only ever threw petty insults at Will because it was the only way he would be able to get his attention.

Sad, really, how Michael thought the only way he would be able to get any kind of reaction from Will was through hurting him, but it was the people he was around who made him think so. He knew he would have to say something soon and he dreaded it.

“C’mon, Wheeler, you haven’t said a thing! You gonna rank him or not?” Troy called, watching the two as Michael leaned his head forward to look Will dead in the eyes.

“God, I can feel the queerness trying to get to me, I think that shit’s contagious. Only makes sense. Byers is diseased, y’know.” Though Michael knew he didn’t mean it in the slightest, the mere thought that Will would have to sit on that comment all day, without any idea that it was complete bullshit, destroyed him. He could see the tears begin to well up in Wills eyes as he kept a straight face, turning away from Michael and walking off without saying a word, Dustin and Lucas following close behind. When the three were about to walk through the school doors, Michael saw Wills body start to jerk, hands furiously wiping at the tears that must’ve been on his cheeks.

“Damn, you didn’t even have to try that hard, Wheeler! Nice!” Michael was too upset himself to celebrate the fact that he knew every day he kept crushing the possibility that anything would happen- even just as friends!- between him and Will.

“Just shut it, Troy, let’s go.” He snaps, grabbing his backpack and heading for the other entrance doors.

## 2. fell

The last bell of the day rang and Will sat in his Algebra class watching every other student file out of the door before he propped his elbows on his desk and sat with his head in his hands. His eyelids were closed so tightly he could see blue light dance on black when he paid close attention, he hoped this would be an easier way to forget that, like every other day, Michael Wheeler would be waiting for him after school to throw more insults his way. Today was worse, though, because as Michael told him off this morning for being a queer, Will realised he was right. Will was gay and everybody was going to find out and kill him, he knew the way people thought around Hawkins, and it was not pretty.

Everybody knew that Liberace was a fairy, everybody knew that George Michael was a queer, but nobody acknowledged it or accepted these facts. Never had either of the men's preferences been publicly stated but the flamboyance they carried themselves with made it obvious to anyone, but no one would say a word. If someone found out you were a queer in Hawkins, Indiana in 1983 you were dead. No one was gonna keep it hush hush like they do with the big shots, oh no. Being a 12 year old boy was a completely different story because nobody was going to look out for you. All anyone would do is forget they cared about you and leave you out to dry.

“Will, honey, are you alright? The bells already won, you can head home now.” Mrs. Ringgold placed a welcoming hand on his back and bent over so she could be eye level with him, “Is there something troubling you?”

He wanted so bad to be able to tell her- tell ANYONE- about Michael Wheeler's wrath and how badly he was over it, and how he wished more than anything that they could be the friends that they were in kindergarten. But, he knew that wasn't possible, and he knew if he told anybody about how awful he was treated he'd get hided by him.

“No, just tired is all! Busy weekend!” Will looked up and gave her the best fake smile he could manage before grabbing his backpack and walking out the classroom after saying goodbye.

The squeaks of his too big, hand-me-down Converse echoed through the empty hall, as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his corduroy jacket and headed to the doors of the school. Looking out the window, he saw his friends waiting by the bike rack and checking for Will, but before he could step outside someone grabbed his backpack from behind and pulled him back. He turned his neck to see Troy in all his glory, grinning like a clown with his face all twisted up.

“Oh, c’mon, Byers! You didn’t think you were going anywhere without saying goodbye to Mikey, did ya?” Will’s heart dropped, his hands grew clammy as he tried to struggle out of Troy’s grip. But, to no avail, he simply wasn’t strong enough. Troy dragged him back farther and turned around so that Will could see Michael walking towards them. Oddly enough, the look on his face wasn’t one of cruel excitement as it usually seemed when they saw each other, but one of annoyance. He sped up his gait and swatted at the hand that was holding onto Will’s backpack.

“C’mon man, we’ve given him enough hell today.” He said, remembering that just this morning he had made Will cry just by saying one little thing.

“Oh, don’t go soft on me, Wheeler! He’s here, we’ve finally got him where we want him!” At this point, Troy had let go of Will and almost pushed him to the side, getting closer to Michael.

Will took this as an opportunity to walk away from the situation at hand without causing a scene. The other two boys bickering had caused them to raise their voices, so assuming they weren’t paying attention to him, he slowly made his way to the big glass doors. Waving to his friends to let them know he was on his way, he pushed through the first door, exhaling deeply as a weight lifted off his shoulders... Only for him to be grabbed and yanked back by Troy, sending him to the ground. Dustin and Lucas winced from the other side of the schoolyard as they watched what went down, dropping their things by their bikes and running across the property to help their friend.

They reached the doors just in time to see Troy drag Will across the floor by his bag, leaving him trapped and flailing his arms around as

he tried to escape. Neither of his friends could get the door opened, it being after school hours, leaving Will to fight for himself. Still, the two boys rattled the handles to the doors and banged on the windows as they shouted at their friend to just fight back. The two of them were well aware of the fact that that simply would not happen. Just before Troy could pick Will up from the ground, Michael pushed him back.

“I said to leave him alone, Troy! I’ve dealt with him for today, you’re terrorizing him! That is not how this works.” Will was confused as Michael spoke, leaving him to the conclusion that these dim-witted bullies had a system for how they messed with kids. It was disgusting.

“I’m looking out for you, Wheeler! You want the queer to infect you? I know that the fairy’s got this cutesy fucking crush on you, I don’t want you to become a queer too!” Troy pushed Michael back by his shoulders, almost causing him to fall, “Do not get all soft on me, Wheeler.” He pointed a finger at Michael’s chest and snarled, breathing heavily in his face. Shocked by Troy’s sudden anger towards him, Michael used this time to get him away from the situation, turning his attention away from the small Byers boy on the ground.

Whilst mid-squabble with Troy, he turned his head towards Will and beckoned him through the doors, pushing back Troy’s shoulder to make him more angry at Michael than Will. It worked, he never put up with his friends bullshit and Troy called James over to them. They started heckling Michael, completely forgetting about what they’d been there to do.

“We told you not to stick up for the fairy, Mikey. Have you gone soft? We’ve warned you about this.”

Not wanting to get involved with the situation that started taking place, Will looked from the three boys, back to the doors of the school before turning and making a run for it, shoving the doors open and running to the bike racks with Lucas and Dustin following him close behind. He hopped on his bike and rested a foot on the ground as his friends caught up with him, both out of breath. The two caught up with him and grabbed their bikes, jogging down the walkway

behind Will, hopping on their bikes only when they got in the parking lot. Dustin looked back for a split second after he heard Troy yelling something, only to see Michael being pulled back by James and punched in the gut. Even though Michael was supposed to be one of the few people he hated, Dustin still felt bad for him. After seeing him stand up for Will like that, he damn well didn't deserve to be pushed around by Troy.

None of them spoke for the first five minutes of the bike ride, it wasn't until they reached a small park that sat on the corner of two roads- Coach & Bear Trail- that anyone said a word. Still, then, the boys were hesitant, all confused about what had just happened in the halls of Hawkins Middle School. Will was worried. Worried that he may have developed feelings for the kid who treated him like utter shit throughout his years attending the school, and worried about what his friends may think of them if they found out. Lucas was at a loss for words as he witnessed his least favorite person stick up for one of his best friends, after seeing him fuck with Will for years. And, Dustin just wanted to go back and return the favor by helping Michael. Even if he had been a shitty person in the past, seeing him get beat on for helping one of Dustins best friends wasn't right.

“Y’know, he did more than hold off Troy.” Dustin said, pulling his bike up on the sidewalk and resting his foot on the pavement, “I saw it. James got ahold of him and was beating the shit out of him.”

“Don’t make me feel worse than I already do, Dustin, I didn’t want Michael to get hurt just cause I couldn’t fight back.” Will looked down at the ground, kicking a rock that he saw off the curb and into the road.

“That shouldn’t make you feel bad, dude, that was badass! The Wheeler kid totally saved your ass it was awesome!” Lucas pushed down his kickstand and hopped off his bike walking over to Will, “I’m just glad you didn’t get hurt, man, imagine explaining that to Joyce.”

“First of all, call her my mom not ‘Joyce’, it’s weird. Second, what am I supposed to do now that I know he’s hurt! All because of me!” His friends shrugged, Lucas walking back to his bike before saying something about him and Dustin needing to go their separate ways as

they went down Bear Trail to where their houses were. Will just sighed heavily, continuing down Coach Street towards his house.

While the bike accelerated downhill, his mind was running faster than his bike could keep up with. Behind him, he could've sworn he heard a person call for him in the distance. In attempt to see who might've been there, he turned his head to look, causing his torso to turn with him, making his bike swerve and hit the curb, throwing him off the seat and onto the concrete road beneath him, trying to cushion his fall by putting his arms in front of himself. Time slowed down as he heard his hand make the dreaded cry- *crrrrack-* as he felt at least three of his fingers bend in ways he didn't think possible and his wrist snap so his fingers could touch it.

Multiple bones in his left arm broken, he was still a ten minute bike ride away from his house as tears welled up in his eyes. Over the sound of his own whimpering, he could hear the patter of someone's tennis shoes on the road running after him. Using his uninjured hand, he wiped the tears from his eyes to avoid anyone see him cry, even if it was a complete stranger. Taking deep, steady breaths, Will stood up and dragged his bike onto the grass just off the road so no to have his bike be run over. As the sound of feet got closer, he sat on the curb with his head buried in the elbow of his arm, injured hand laying beside him so he didn't have to look at the mangled mess.

"Will, oh my God, are you alright? I didn't mean to make you fall I just-"

"Mike?" Will looked up to see a red faced Michael Wheeler, sporting many scrapes and fresh bruises, along with a new black eye. It was odd, Nobody had called him 'Mike' since kindergarten, yet it felt right to him.

"Let me get that for you!" He quickly helped Will up and grabbed his bike from the pavement, getting it on its wheels and starting to walk down Coach, closer to where it intersected with Mirkwood, "We should probably head back to your place, shouldn't we? Here, wrap your arm with this. That was a pretty nasty fall, with a pretty gnarly outcome."

Mike held Wills bike upright with his knee as he took off his jacket

and handed it to him, smiling as their hands grazed past each others. Will proceeded to wrap up his broken arm with the jacket, tying it around his neck as a makeshift sling as the two of them started walking. They didn't talk much at first, but as they neared Mirkwood, the boys started conversing about anything that came to their minds- mostly about comics, how Mike's friends would totally kill him if they found out he enjoyed Dungeons and Dragons, and how he was sorry for giving him shit that morning.

"It really wasn't cool of me to say that, it was harsh. I know I hurt your feelings and I just want you to know that's not who I am, it's who Troy and James want me to be, y'know? I know this apology isn't good enough I just need time to think of something that'll make this better. I want to be friends again, Will. I don't deserve it, but I miss your friendship and I'll need a much better apology than this if I ever want that friendship back, won't I?" Mike said as they neared Wills house.

"It wasn't cool, like at all. It really hurt my feelings, Mike. But I am willing to try and be friends again. It was really cool how you stood up for me like that, thank you." Will watched Mike rest his bike against the wooden stairs he was walking up, "I'm looking forward to that grand apology, Wheeler."

Mike smiled back at him as he knocked on the door, looking up at the smaller boy longingly, immeasurably jealous at how kind and forgiving he could be. Jonathan opened the door, taking one look at Will before gasping and looking at Mike.

"Was this you?!" He grabbed Will and pulled him inside, pushing his body behind him.

"Jonathan, I just fell, it's fine! Don't worry about it." Will said, shooing his older brother back inside before smiling down at Mike and saying one last thank you before closing the door.

### 3. jacket

#### Notes for the Chapter:

hey i really appreciate comments a lot thanks

The next day rolled around and Michael- now appreciating the shortened 'Mike'- walked through the busy halls of Hawkins Middle School, occasionally bumping shoulders passive aggressively to people who looked at him the wrong way. While he didn't necessarily enjoy being straightforward and almost rude, it was what he knew best. If not a way to cope for being invisible at home, it was carved into his skull by Troy that intimidation was best for gaining respect from his peers. Deep down, he knew this was wrong, but he couldn't help but shove past kids who gave him nasty looks as they grimaced at his black eye. Though, he liked the attention he got from this, he wished people would speak up and say something about it. If anything, Mike was looking for a reaction from his peers. One that he didn't receive at home.

He walked home that day, at least an hour later than he always was, and arrived to find his parents weren't concerned in the slightest. His mother stood in the kitchen, preparing the dinner they were set to eat in about an hour, and didn't even look twice as he stood there, badly beaten and home late with no explanation. In the living room, his father was sat on his La-Z-boy, reclined all the way back watching some commercials on their TV. Mike walked and stood directly in his father's line of vision, hoping that maybe- JUST MAYBE- his father may have some concern as to why he was late and why he looked so roughed up. All he got in return was a hand, shooing him away from the TV stand.

"You're blocking the television, kid. Scram, go downstairs and play your, uh... Go play your wizards and caves game." He gruffed, taking a sip from the beer that rested in his hands, seemingly unaware of the fact that his only son was hurting.

Nobody noticed he was until he saw Nancy.

He walked up the stairs, making sure to step heavier with each stair

he climbed, stomps echoing throughout the house. With his book bag weighing him down and his beaten body tired from the ‘fight’ with Troy, (it hadn’t been much of a fight, as James held him back and kept him from retaliating) Mike Wheeler was more than eager to get to his room and go to sleep. A wonderful way to avoid his family as much as they avoided him, but what he failed to notice was that Nancy’s door was wide open and she saw every part of his bruising face. Behind him, she gasped, grabbing his shirt by the collar and dragging him inside her room before promptly slamming the door shut.

“What the hell Mikey, you shouldn’t be the one getting beaten on!” She whisper-yelled, leaning down slightly so she could be closer when facing him, “What is this? Why did it take you so long to get home?!”

“There was a fight,” Was all he said. When she looked back at him, unsatisfied with the answer, he thought it best to just tell her the truth. “Okay it wasn’t really a fight. There’s this kid, Byers, and y’know I pick on him a whole lot, but I’ve realized I don’t really wanna pick on him anymore so I told Troy to lay off and then the kid ran off so Troy got mad at me and beat on me while James held me back. After school I ran to find the Byers kid and accidentally broke his arm cause I called after him and made him crash his bike.” He stopped to take a deep breath.

“Mike, holy shit,” Was all she could say back to him, before hugging him. “What made you realize you don’t really wanna pick on him anymore? Sudden change of heart?”

A long, deep sigh exited his mouth and he dropped his bag on the floor and lay down on his sister’s bed. Of course there were many reasons he didn’t want to mess with the kid anymore, but many of these reasons he wasn’t even aware of himself. Maybe it was the way that Will looked up to him when he spoke down on him, eyes widened in a strange mix of fear and respect. Or, possibly, it could be the fact that when Mike heard him speak, the little laughs he picked up made him feel like someone had punched him in the gut and kicked the backs of his knees. Or the way that his hair often got in his eyes, causing Will to frantically move it so that he could look people in the eyes when they spoke to him.

But he couldn't just tell Nancy this. If anyone found out that Michael Wheeler suspected he may be a queer, the whole town of Hawkins would be after him. Maybe even Will would be.

These thoughts followed him through the hallways at school, his nose turned up and his chest puffed out, nobody would mess with him. When Mike was feeling particularly vindictive, he had this arrogant aura that surrounded him. Almost driving people away immediately, others seemed to bounce right off of him and go their merry way if he didn't decide otherwise. Though, he wasn't the strongest of his group, people feared him. And, what Michael Wheeler says to do, will be done.

Seemingly, one person wasn't afraid of his off putting demeanor. Will Byers walked up to Mike as the bell rang for seventh grade lunch, a pop in his step and a smile on his face despite the sling that held his arm and the poorly bandaged mess that was his left hand, still visibly mangled as he had yet to get a cast. The closer he got, the more he realized that he had been wearing the jacket the Mike had given him the day prior to help him with his broken hand, and as he stepped towards him he realized that that was not how he wanted to be seen by an upset Mike Wheeler. Before he could turn around, Mike let himself slouch over and lose his snobby attitude, immediately making Will feel less intimidated to approach him.

"I like your style, Byers. Fits you nice, huh?" Mike smiled, wrinkles by his eye causing a dull pain to shoot behind his eye as he put a hand in his pocket and popped the collar of the jacket that sat on Will's shoulders.

"I-I was gonna return it today, a-actually, but I totally fuh-forgot my other jacket at home so I just thought I'd wear th-this, if that's alright." Will looked at the ground awkwardly, blush crawling on his cheeks as it always did when he fibbed or got flustered. Lucky for him both happened at the same exact time and he couldn't be more miserable. Cheeks flushed with rosy pinks, Will started to take off the jacket that belonged to the boy standing in front of him and had to stop when it got to his sling. Slowly, he started to take off his sling in hopes that he could get this done with before the tardy bell rang and both of them got in trouble, but Mike stopped him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Listen, Byers, you don’t have to give me back the jacket. It suits you well, just make sure Troy and James don’t-” He was cut off by heavy steps beating down the hall. Mike’s heart stopped, both embarrassed to be caught being all buddy-buddy with Will and ashamed he even considered being embarrassed about being seen with such a sweet kid.

“Make sure Troy and James don’t what?” Both boys let out a sigh of relief as the voice revealed itself to be one of Will’s good friends, Dustin, another boy that Mike had been friends with in the early years of elementary school. He stood between the two of them and looked from one to the other before connecting some kind of dots in his mind and smiling. “Nice sweatshirt, Will, haven’t seen this one before I don’t think.”

“Oh! This is Mike’s, actually! He lent it to t-” Yet again, Dustin cut them off.

“I don’t need to know the full story now, but please do inform me when school’s out. Don’t need to be late again, I’ve walked every hall and Mrs. Cook still thinks I’m in the restroom!” Dustin began to walk off, swinging the hall pass around in his hands and whistling to himself.

“Hey, Dustin, wait up!” Mike called after him, only to see him stop in his tracks and pivot to see him, now slowly walking backwards, “I was wondering if you, Will and Lucas maybe wanted to come over Friday after school and spend the night!”

This caused Dustin to really stop, even Will had some look of confusion on his face. Mike quickly racked his brain to remember things that Will had told him about his friends as they walked to his house the day before. His body almost physically jolted as he remembered something that both him and Will’s friends had one huge common interest.

“I’ve been planning this D&D campaign and I just need a few other people to play with.”

Luckily, that was enough to sell him, Dustin nodded his head and agreed. They stood there for a few more minutes, agreeing to tell

Lucas about the plans and making sure no one was busy as they decided a place to meet. Mike, having the others interest in mind, decided that it would be best if they met maybe ten minutes after the last bell in front of the library, so that all of them could avoid Troy and whatever wrath of his would be unleashed.

“I’m looking forward to it!” Mike said as they parted ways, silently rejoicing in the back of his mind that he was making some kind of progress in being forgiven by Will Byers. Still, he knew that this wouldn’t be enough and he hoped more than anything that he could think of some way to make it up to him before Friday. Suddenly, for the first time in all his years of attending school in Hawkins ISD, he was happy that he still had most of the week ahead of him.

## 4. buddy

The day went smoothly, and somehow Mike was able to avoid Troy and James enough to where he didn't have to pester his newly rediscovered friends. The last bell rang and he nearly got his hopes up, shortly believing it to be Friday, but to no avail he was walking out of Hawkins Middle School on a Tuesday afternoon with wind whipping his hair wildly in his eyes. It was a stark contrast between his pale, porcelain skin and his shaggy dark brown hair, but it was a contrast many people in the school enjoyed to look at quite frequently. From girls like Kimberly Wilson, a favorite amongst everyone at that school (and, arguably, one of the most popular), to Will By-- Melissa Hagarty. There was no denying Mike Wheeler was hot shit.

Distracted by his seemingly easy, thoughtless meandering in the halls, Mike failed to notice that there were three boys trailing behind him until one of them grabbed his shoulder and turned him around. No matter what terms Mike was on with Troy and James, it always seemed like they were rough with him.

"Wheeler, tell me it isn't true," Was all Troy said to him, failing to explain the reasoning of his accusations.

"The hell are you talking about? What isn't true?" Mike couldn't figure out what Troy was getting at, but God he hated that he hoped Troy hadn't found out about his talk with Will.

"Buddy here told me that you were seen having a friendly conversation with our favorite little fairy! And his toothless freak friend, all why the queer was wearing your athletics jacket. It's not smart to lend your pals your clothes if they very clearly have your last name scrawled on the back for all of Hawkins Middle to see." The three boys cornered him against the wall and Mike looked at the one who had ratted him out.

Buddy Lee Moore stood there with his arms crossed in front of his chest, wearing a smirk on his stupid face. He was a bulky kid, clearly muscular enough to intimidate by him but his idiocy kept Mike from being too scared as he knew he could beat him in any fight if he

used his wits. Buddy hang around the three of them but was never really apart of the little clique they had formed, even though they could all tell that he wanted in more than anything. The poor kid nearly worshipped Troy, always sucking up to him and getting dirt on other people for him, even though his attempts didn't go unnoticed, Troy used this desperation against him and had poor Buddy Lee Moore do all his dirty work for him.

Of course, Mike knew this but the thought slipped his mind as he spoke to Will. Eyes slowly widening, he realized that if Buddy had seen his conversation with Will and Dustin, he must've seen the way he subconsciously flirted with the former. Hell, Mike didn't even completely realize himself that that was what he was doing, but something in him shuddered at the thought of Troy knowing about the conversation they had, even though it was all about some stupid jacket.

And he did see everything, alright. He saw everything from Mike grabbing the collar of his jacket that sat on Will's shoulders, Will blushing profusely as they spoke, and Mike taking time in eyeing Will up and down. Of course, when he thought they were alone he was quick to take in as much of Wills radiant beauty as possible. Buddy knew there was something up, but no matter how bad he wanted to chum around Troy and James, he knew somewhere in his heart that telling them everything he had seen would just be wrong. Even for a guy willing to do anything to hang around these kids, he couldn't bring himself to tell Troy how he saw Mike's eyes light up when he looked Will in the eyes. Of course, he still told Troy what he saw, but only the obvious details. Who was there, how they acted, the damn jacket.

"The kid broke his arm yesterday, I just gave him the jacket as a kind of sling as he went home! He left his other jacket at his place, you're overthinking this, Troy." Mike was quick to defend both himself and Will, afraid that if he said the wrong thing it'd set the other three off on a killing spree.

"He doesn't have a home to leave his jacket, Wheeler! He probably left and went to the landfill!" James chuckled to himself as Troy struggled to hold back his laugh before he held up one hand in a way that told James to shut his mouth.

“James, let me handle this,” Troy looked like he was about to turn red and have steam tunneling out of his ears, “You can’t go from bashing the queer to being his little boyfriend, you better fucking stay away from him Wheeler. I mean it. You don’t wanna know what’ll happen if you keep hanging around him.”

Deafening silence filled the air, Mike had held his breath as he looked Troy in the eyes, refusing to be the first to back down. The two of them were now stood across from each other so close the Mike could feel Troy’s breath down his neck, locked in a standoff between who would give up their ground. A teacher walked past and shooed away James and Buddy, leaving the other two still standing in the hall. He questioned what the students were doing standing there in the hall after the last bell of they day had rung, never having met a pair who wanted to stay after school was out, but he decided not to question it as he walked out of the doors and to his car.

Mike exhaled deeply, letting himself take calming breaths as he stood face-to-face with his best friend, who seemed to be more his enemy these days. He didn’t want to fight, even though he hadn’t properly been friends with Will in years he remembered that he hated violence. Always a pacifist, since his father started drinking and he vowed he would never be the person to inflict pain on anyone else.

“Troy, I’m gonna leave the school now. Nancy is waiting outside with Barbara to pick me up. You’re going to let me leave and you aren’t going to give me any trouble.” Mike started to step back, not breaking eye contact with Troy, “And we aren’t going to get in a fight over this, because you don’t care about the queer.”

Behind him he pushed the doors open and ran out to his sisters friends Volkswagen cabby, quickly hopping in and buckling his seatbelt before looking back to see Troy still standing where he had left him, confused and defeated.

Troy, unbeknownst to Mike, knew that there was something happening. Something that absolutely disgusted Troy. Mike’s fondness for Will was turning into a romantic infatuation, and already within a few days of friendship, he was willing to put himself behind Will in order for him to be kept safe. Troy knew something was going on, and he knew he was gonna give both those boys hell.